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AUTHOR Kreiser, Jeanette S.
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ABSTRACT

Empathy has been defined in a number of different ways. Some, such as Sarbin and Flavell, have emphasized the cognitive aspects of empathy in defining it as the ability to take-the-role-of-the-other. Others, such as Stewart, Borke, Iannotti, and Feshbach, have emphasized the affective processes involved in empathy. Although it is difficult, perhaps even impossible, totally to separate and distinguish cognitive and affective components as they interact in the actual expression of empathy, it may be that the significance and impact of these separate components of empathic ability will be found to vary under different conditions. Separation of the concept of empathy into components can serve to aid counselor trainees to apprehend and implement empathic behavior in their counseling. Finally, recognition of the complex nature of these cognitive and affective components of the empathy concept should enhance the counselor's awareness of, and effective communication with, others whose skills in this area may differ from his own. (Author)

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Empathy as Either a Cognitive or an Affective Process

Jeanette Sharpe Kreiser
The University of Rochester
College of Education

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The title of this paper is "Empathy as Either a Cognitive or an Affective Process." At the outset, I wish to make it clear that I find it difficult to conceive of any human condition or behavior as lying exclusively within the cognitive or the affective domains. Indeed, as we examine the definitions of empathy proposed by a number of different theorists, we shall see that for virtually all of them, empathy involves simultaneously both cognitive and affective processes. Even so, I shall argue that a separate consideration of the cognitive and affective aspects of empathy can be useful and enlightening for those associated with the field of counseling. First, we shall briefly review several approaches to the definition of empathy.

Basing his definition on role theory, Sarbin sees empathy as primarily a cognitive process. For him, empathy involves "role-taking" or taking-the-role-of-the-other, which means "adopting the perspective or attitude of the other" (Sarbin, 1954, p. 232). A role is a "patterned sequence of learned actions or deeds performed by a person in an interaction situation" (Sarbin, 1954, p. 225). The role-taking process is usually covert, in that the individual is able to put himself in the other's role, and thus to understand the other's point of view. The role-taker does not then proceed to enact the role of the other, although at times such an enactment may occur, as might be the case in an inadvertent overt expression of joy at another's success. Since, for Sarbin, the process of empathy itself is primarily covert, the presence of empathy can only be inferred rather than directly measured. Because "taking-the-role-of-the-other" enables the

role-taker to understand the other's viewpoint, and thus react more appropriately to the other, successful communication (or other effective social behaviors) as well as accurate prediction of the other's thoughts, feelings, and/or behavior should provide evidence of this skill. Researchers who have sought to operationalize Sarbin's definition have accordingly attempted to measure empathy in a variety of ways.

Flavell, for example, conceives of the role of cognitive empathy in successful communication in the following manner. An individual codes a message to the receiver-empathizer. The receiver-empathizer discriminates the role attributes of the sender, a cognitive process, and uses this information to understand more effectively the message he is receiving. He then codes his own message back to the original sender, again a cognitive process, taking into account the original sender's role attributes in order to transmit the message more effectively back to him. Meanwhile, the receiver-empathizer codes the message in his own manner for himself. Throughout the process the receiver-empathizer thus continues to be simultaneously aware of his own as well as of the other's viewpoint. Given this conception of the role of empathy, Flavell, therefore, developed tasks to discriminate the abilities of his subjects to code messages for others. He asked subjects to perform such tasks as describing an object to a blindfolded person. As one might expect, relative ability to complete such tasks successfully is an age-related skill. A young child is not able to maintain an understanding that the other's point of view is different from his own. This same differentiated ability was evidenced in the choices of gifts which young children made for

their parents; generally these clearly reflected the child's desires rather than those of an adult.

Although both Sarbin and Flavell view role-taking as primarily a cognitive process, nevertheless, for them, affective processes may be involved as well. Sarbin points out that any role may be enacted with different degrees of organismic involvement; if the other's role contains significant affect, and if the empathizer is heavily involved in the role to be taken, affective processes as well as cognitive ones will be occurring during role-taking.

Although Bronfenbrenner (1958) does not base his research directly on role theory, his argument can be viewed as complementary to, and an elaboration upon, the positions taken by role theorists. He delineates a number of separate skills that are involved in what he calls social perception--an ability which may be roughly equated with Sarbin's "role-taking" ability. Bronfenbrenner points out that skill in social perception may vary with the nature of the social object, which may be a particular individual, a small group, or larger society. Further, Bronfenbrenner demonstrates that individual skill may vary, depending upon one's interpersonal perspective; ability to predict the reactions of another individual to one's own behavior, for example, may be unrelated to the ability to understand how others may reciprocally react to each other.

Unlike the theorists already discussed, a number of other scholars have viewed the affective processes as the crucial component in their definitions of empathy. Stewart, building on psychoanalytic theory, emphasizes affect as critical to the pro-

cess of empathy. "Empathy," he argues, "is a deliberate identification with another, promoting one's knowledge of the other as well as of oneself in striving to understand what is now foreign, but which one may imagine, curbed by the other's responses, to be something similar to one's own experience" (Stewart, 1956, p. 12). Nevertheless, empathy, as opposed to what Stewart calls "crude identification," does require the extensive use of a number of cognitive skills. According to Stewart, "effort and imagination, choice and deliberation, are required by the empathic act" (Stewart, 1956, p. 13). For him, the objective measure of empathy is an impossibility, since only the persons involved can recognize and communicate the process of identification which is going on. As Stewart says, "the chief criterion of effective empathy is interpersonal testimony; persons agree that they are communicating well, or they don't. Even if they don't agree, there is effective empathy, provided they continue to strive for common ground (Stewart, 1956, p. 151).

Borke (1971), Iannotti (1974) and Feshbach (1975) also see the affective component as of primary importance in the process of empathy, although, unlike Stewart, all three of these researchers have attempted actually to measure that affective component in some manner. To be sure, they are not in complete agreement with one another in their views of the nature of empathy. While both Feshbach and Iannotti are prepared to acknowledge the importance of cognitive elements in their discussion of empathy, Borke, in contrast, apparently conceives of empathy as more purely affect than do either of the others. Despite this difference, all three of these authors have utilized similar meas-

ures of empathy, measures which assess the degree of similarity between the emotional state of observed and that of observer. Unfortunately, as Chandler (1974, p. 3) points out, "any proposed measure of empathic skill . . . which does not permit a distinction to be drawn between the projection of one's own feelings and the accurate understanding of someone else's would seem to seriously pervert the usual meaning of the term." Such measures do not take into account the differences among the processes of projection, identification, and empathy, processes which involve differences in degree and type of cognitive intrusions into the affective domain. Any attempt to distinguish the empathic response from these other processes will of necessity involve cognitive elements in the measurement.

The nature of the above debates and the complexity of the previous definitions point up the fact that empathy is indeed an elusive process--as the title of this symposium asserts. It is clear, too, that it is difficult, perhaps even impossible, totally to separate and distinguish cognitive and affective components as they interact in the actual expression of empathy. Nevertheless, examination of and research into the separate roles cognitive and affective aspects of empathy play in facilitating the counseling process may produce significant insights into the nature of counseling. As Buchheimer (1963, p. 66) points out, "Empathic responsiveness in counseling may involve a process of predictions and interaction. Role-taking may be more applicable to a predictive type of empathy while the concept of mutuality of Stewart and Murray . . . may be more appropriate to the interactive aspects of empathic responsiveness."

It may be that the significance and impact of these separate components of empathic ability will be found to vary under different conditions. Thus, when the counseling process is oriented primarily toward intrapersonal or more affective issues, "affective empathy" may be found to be the more critical element. On the other hand, when counseling is oriented primarily toward cognitive issues, such as might be the case in choices concerning future career roles, "cognitive empathy" may be found to be the more important variable.

Separation of the concept of empathy into components can serve to aid counselor trainees to apprehend and implement empathic behavior in their counseling. As more is learned about the specific skills necessary to the expression of empathy, counselor educators will be able to focus upon particular trainee weaknesses and develop intervention techniques designed to remedy these areas of weakness. Several authors (Chandler, Greenspan & Barenboim, 1974; Cooney, 1977) have already implemented with some success programs designed to develop empathy-related skills in other contexts.

Finally, recognition of the complex nature of these cognitive and affective components of the empathy concept, and an understanding of the age-related development of abilities in this area should enhance the counselor's awareness of, and effective communication with, others whose skills in this area may differ from his own.

Let us have, therefore, more studies in which these complex processes are clarified, refined, and investigated. Such research may produce results significant for counselor practitioners and educators.

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